

[Mr. Richard]

LIFE HISTORY

February 27, 1939

Mr. J. H. Emerick (white)

Mr. L. L. Emerick "

157 First St.

Athens, Georgia

Fishermen

Grace McCune

The rain was coming down in torrents as I started out in a taxi to get an interview with Mr. Richards and his son about some of their fishing trips. As the taxi crossed the river and left the pavement, it turned around a curve and started up one of Georgia's famous old red hills. It seemed to me that every time the car gained one foot, it slipped back two, and I was sure we would land in the river at the bottom of the hill. But the driver laughed, and said, "We'll make it, for I have already pulled this hill several times today."

The driver was right. We made it after several attempts and I drew a breath of relief as he stopped in front of the house. Mr. Richards and his son, Lee, were out in the back yard under a long shed looking over their fishing equipment. I never knew that it really required so many things to be a fisherman. There were fish lines, and corks for pole fishing as they called it, trot lines and baskets that they used to keep their fish in after they were caught.

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Then there were the steel traps, which was used in trapping, and then their camp stove. This was made as they explained out of the steel rims of wagon wheels, as that was the best material they could get for that. The stove was a frame, made like a small table about eighteen inches, high with cross pieces, across the top for the pans, pots and especially the coffee pot to sit on and there was no danger of them turning over. They assured me that with a good fire built under this stove cooking was no problem.

Picking up a large coffee pot, which would hold several gallons and was black from long use over many fires, Mr. Richards said, "This old pot has been on many trips with me, and is just like an old friend. I would not know what to do without it. We always try to be comfortable when we go on our trips. I have a tent, also these, and he showed me several camp cots, go with us also and we have good blankets to keep us warm. We have dishes to. Of course, they are tin cups and plates for they can be carried around without any fear of breaking them.

"But why are you out in all this rain today? Just to ask me about fishing. Do you want to go fishing?" "No," I answered, "that is one thing I don't like to do. I can't be still long enough to fish and camp out." "Only one time," I replied, "and that was with my dad and I didn't enjoy that." "Why?" he asked. "I knew your dad and he enjoyed a good fishing trip as much as anyone I ever knew and I can't see why anyone could not enjoy it." "Well," I admitted, "maybe you are not as afraid of snakes as I am." This brought a hearty laugh from both of them and Lee said, "just like a woman."

This was not my first visit to this home, as I had interviewed Mrs. Richards a few weeks back for a life history of the mill village. She heard them laughing and came out to the shed where they were showing me their things. "What are they doing to you?" she asked. "Are they showing you those worms?" Her son laughed again and said, "No, she would be afraid of them for she is afraid of snakes, imagine that."

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Mr. Richards said, "talking about women just look at this new fish basket of mine all the bottom cut out." Mrs. Richards laughed 3 and said, "Yes I did it. He left the basket in the chicken yard, and one of my hens got in it to lay and she couldn't get out. I tried to get her out and couldn't so I just cut the bottom out. Oh, yes, they both put up an argument, said the basket cost more than two or three old hens. But I didn't see it that way, and any way the hen is out and they can put in another wire bottom. "

"Why don't you all come in the house to the fire?" Laughing she turned to me and said, "Tell him he is too old to be out in the rain." I didn't say anything. I didn't know if I should or not, for the truth was he didn't look old to me. He and his son had on their overalls, and high-top boots. I saw only a tall, very erect man, apparently not over fifty. I was surprised when he laughed and said, "Don't mind Mammy, she is just reminding me that I was seventy-five yesterday."

I was sure they were teasing and I laughed. But he grinned and said "it is a fact, yesterday was my birthday, and I am really that old, but I sure don't feel my age. But come on we will go in the house. I want you to eat a piece of my cake. In fact? I had two cakes. My daughter brought me one, and of course Mammy cooked me one. But you know neither one of them put any candles on them. I guess they just hated to remind me too much of my age.

"But I did have a nice day, for we was all at home together, and I got one of mammy's hens for dinner and I liked to think it was the one that got in my new fish basket, but of course she wouldn't have killed that one for anything. As we started in the house I remembered my last visit here and the delicious dinner that I had with them. I regretted the sandwich I had before I left town. As we went through the clean warm kitchen, I knew if they insisted I would never be able to resist that dinner.

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We went through the kitchen to a bedroom where a bright fire in the grate made the room so comfortable. The son turned on the radio to get the news report and for a few minutes they were quiet as they listened to the reports of a tornado in South Georgia. " On the day before that was terrible, " he said. " But I thought last week that we were going to be blown away. " "No," he said as I started to ask where, "We wasn't here, but down on the river, and as the Negros say, 'hit was way down in Greene County'" "How did you get down there?" I asked, "Surely you didn't go that far in a boat. "

Mr. Richards laughed and said, "You evidently don't know your old Oconee River. Why I have been as far as Milledgeville, Ga. in my boat many times. " " But how do you manage about the dam? " I asked and I regretted that question immediately, for they both laughed and said, "Go over it."

Then Mr. Richards said, "We carry the boat in a truck and put it in the river below the dam and after you pass the cemetery bridge there is no more trouble, but speaking of the dam, have you ever been around it? "

"No," I replied, "I don't know why but I just never have.

"Then, you should," he replied , " and see those old pot holes as they call them. "

"Some of those holes are all of eighteen inches deep and dug out in solid rock. They are supposed to have been made by the Indians for cooking in. I have seen them ever since I was a small child, just large enough to follow my daddy around. I guess that is where I get my love of fishing for that was practically all he ever done was fish and hunt."

Mrs. Richards came to the door, and said "Come and eat dinner, then you can talk all the evening."

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I thanked her and said I had already had my lunch before I left town , ” but that was a long time ago for you was here at eleven o'clock and now it is one. she insisted When you get these men to talking you will wish you had eaten and besides, Grandpa wants you to eat some of his cake. I admit it did not take very much insisting for me to eat accept. I enjoyed it very much for whether it was the chicken that caused the fish basket to be ruined, or not, It was delicious, as well as the cake.

After dinner was over and we were back around the fire, I asked them to tell me about their trip to Greene County.

“Well,” Mr. Richards said, “We started out on the 11th day of January and didn't get back until the 17th of February. We did not intend to stay that long, but we got caught by the high waters and couldn't get away for we was in our boat. I think it rained just about the hardest I have ever seen and the wind was terrible. I thought sometimes that our tent would go inspite of all we could do, and if we had been up on the hill it would have blown away, for trees were just torn up by the roots, but we were down near the swamp lands and the trees around us protected us I guess. Yet it is a wonder some of them didn't blow over on the tent.

“No, we didn't have any luck on this trip. Usually we put out our traps on creeks and rivers to catch minks and musk rats, but the streams were so bad that we couldn't put out many traps and in all that time we only got about four minks and a few muskrats. We caught a few fish to eat, and caught a few squirells and some rabbits, but we had plenty to eat. The hardest thing was to get enough dry wood for fires and cooking. But you know there is always a way to get along if you try hard enough. Yet I don't like to be out on trips much when the weather is so bad.

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“Fishing is not what it has been, for I have seen the time when I could make good money fishing and hunting. It was no trouble to sell all the fish we could catch, and get a good

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price for them There was also a demand for game of all kind, but the automobiles have changed all that, as well as they have changed many other things, even the railroads.”

“But just how have they affected fishing?” I asked.

“Will, almost everyone or at least the greatest majority of people own a car and now it is no trouble for them to get out for a day of fishing or hunting and in that way they get all the fish they want and game too. You know it does not take you long in a car to go many miles and the roads are so much better. Why, I can remember when it would have been almost impossible to get near a river with a wagon. But now, you can ride to the banks of almost any river in a car. And just look at all the freight trucks as well as the passenger busses on the highways.

“No, there is no pay in fishing any more. We have to have a license to fish, another one if we sell them, and it means a different license in every county that you go in to hunt or fish. You can't sell game either. There are so many people fishing now, that there are not as many fish as there were a few years ago. I really think Clarke County has less than any other County. “

“What do you use for bait?” I asked.

“Well, that is according to how you fish mostly. Just the common old fish bait worm is good bait and especially for pole fishing. Of course, some people like these bait that you buy. I mean these flies and things like that. I had rather hunt my own bait. There are many different kind. One is the catawba worm or ‘catalpa’ is the way it is spelled now I think. But it used to be just <printpgno>7 plain catawba and you get them off catawba tree. Did you ever see any catawba trees? “

“Yes, on a trip one time to North Carolina,” I replied. “But I did not know there were many in Georgia. “

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"Why I have some out here in my back yard," he said. "But you are right, there are more in North Carolina and there is a river there, that I am told, is named Catawba, because of so many of these trees along the banks. But I put out my trees especially to get the worms for fishing. The common old grub worms make good fish bait. Ground puppies are also good but hard to get. " [?] I didn't have any idea what ground puppies were and I was afraid to ask, as they had already laughed at me so many times.

But I guess my expression showed my curosity, for he said, "Did you ever see any ground puppies?" I hesitated, then very meekly admitted that I didn't know. They were having a grand time with me. But I had started out to learn something about how they fished, and I took it like a good sport and laughed with them.

"Didn't you ever go to school?" his son asked.

"Yes," I replied, "and I think I have owned a dog of most every kind, but I guess I just didn't ever own one of the ground puppies. "

This brought a yell from them, and I knew I had said the wrong thing again. So I just grinned very sickly and came across and asked what a ground puppy was. After they got over [their?] laugh. They explained that it was a worm.

Mrs. Richards also laughed with them, but said, "Don't let them get the best of you. " " I am trying not." I replied, "but they seem to be doing it just the same. But if a ground puppy is a worm. I want to know what kind of a worm it is."

Then Mr. Richards said, "Well, it is really more like a lizard than a worm. It is found under old rotten logs on river banks, but 8 the swamps are the best places for them. There are different kinds. The ones that we get around here are mostly a dark blue in color and just about three inches long. But down in Greene County most of them are striped, dark blue and white, and are I believe just a little larger. There is just about twoo good bait in a dog. They have a slime on them much like a snail. Then there is another kind that you find

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mostly in the dryer places that are a dark reddish color, I don't like to fool with them as they are hard to find. I really don't know where they got the name of ground puppies but that is all I have ever heard them called.

"When we could fish with baskets, that is bait the basket and put it in the river, yes the basket was tied to something on the bank to keep it from washing away, but it is against the law now to fish with a basket. The bait was old spoiled cheese. I have used many different baits: muskrat cooked is a very good bait and raw meats, even the old grasshopper is fine bait for a hook, but it takes a mighty long time to get enough of these to try to fish with. A few years back when fish was plentiful, we really could catch fish in a basket.

"Did you ever see a trotline put out?" [?] I remembered little of the only fishing trip I ever made and was afraid to say, but as he seemed to expect me to say something, I asked if it was a line that run across the river for the small lines to fasten to, and for one time I was at least partly right.

"He said, "Well, you do at least know a little don't you? " and grinned, "But when we are fishing with trotlines they are put out and baited at night and we do not go back to them until the next morning. "

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"How long have you fished? " I asked.

"Well, ever since I have been large enough to follow around after my daddy. He was a great fisherman. I have fished in all the streams in Clarke County as well as other nearby counties. And I have really fished in this old Oconee River. I have had good luck, and bad luck in fishing. Many is the time I have went back to look at my hooks and find them all gone, but you will find some interesting things on the banks of the river. One of them is

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a very large Indian mound. It has been there so long that large trees are growing on it. I heard a few days ago that the government was going to open it and see what is in it. "

"What kind of fish do you catch around here? " I asked.

"Well, they are mostly catfish, perch and minnows, but in the fresh water lakes you catch bass and perch. The largest fish I ever caught around here was a blue cat, weighing twenty-one pounds. "

He laughed and said, "As long as you don't do any fishing I will tell you this, fish are just like a woman. When they get excited and scared, why I have even had them to jump in the boat.

"Is that just a fish story?" I asked, "or is it really facts.

"I believe you are learning," he said. " But I have really had that to happen; but I admit not often. But One time when I was a fishing trip in near Little Rock, [in?] Arkansas, and that is where I caught the largest fish I ever caught, and this is no fish story either it s weight a little over 75 pounds. Was I excited? Now, I really believe that you don't know anything about fishing, for anyone that has ever fished would know that is the ambition of a fisherman is catch a large fish and I don't know which was more excited, the fish, me or my little dog.

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As he mentioned go, ? the yellow and brown dog lying at his feet raised her head to look at him. He reached down to pat its head and said, "No, it wasn't this one. It is dead, but now you can laugh for it was just a little poodle dog but she was a good sport if she was little and would follow me, regardless of where I went. I have had to carry her lots of times because she was too small to keep up with me. But about the only time I ever saw her really scared was one day when we were fishing. She was asleep on my old coat in the bottom of the boat. I was trying to pull in a line, and evidently got the fish scared for

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one jumped out of the water and fell on top of the dog, poor little thing, she gave a yelp, jumped and fell out of the boat.” He laughed heartily, as he said: “You know I though I never would get her to come back to the boat and she did hate to get wet so bad. After I got her back, I wrapped her up in the coat and we quit fishing for the day.

“And how I did enjoy seining. You use a net for that and just crowds of us would go seining and catch fish enough in just no time for a big fish fry, and that is really my greatest pleasure is a fishing trip off on a camp. I never did much fishing with a gill net, or as some call it a floating net. It is also against the law to use them any more, even in the open season for fishing.

“July and August are the best times for fishing around here. That is when I just can't stay off of a camp. I love the water and am happiest when I am on it. I only have two children. My son here and a daughter, but they are almost as bad about fishing as I am and have been with me many times. Lee will be just like me. In fact, he is now, and when he is not working on his job as a painter you will find him off somewhere on the river fishing or hunting. My daughter is a good fisherman and can handle a boat like a man. That 11 son of hers, he is my only grandson, but I have five grandchildren, likes fishing. I used to take him with me, when he was very small.

“Do you make good with your trapping? I asked.

“Sometimes, yes,” he replied, “but even that is not so much now. Of course if we could catch plenty of the game it would pay fine. We stretched the skins out on a board and dry them out good before we skip ? them off, but you know we have plenty of fox here, and they are really getting bad and something is going to have to be done about them or the country will soon be overrun with them.

“There are plenty of coons and opossums here too? Did you ever go hunting?” he asked.

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"Well, one time," I replied, "but it was just a rabbit hunt, and I didn't catch anything. He laughed and said, "Did you expect to catch them or kill them.

"My brother killed several," I replied. I knew your brother he said. We used to go on many fishing trips together, he was a good sport, always ready to go his part in every way, work or play.

"My daddy was a member of the old Volunteer fire company and as I followed him in his love for fishing and hunting, I also belonged to the Volunteer fire company. I was a member of the 'Bloomfield Hose and Reel Company No. 4. We were known as the 'dirty dozen.' There were several different companies and we had great times together, even if we were always trying to do just a little bit better than the other company. I still have a medal that was given my father by his old company, for his good service in 1873. I was one of the first ones that stayed on the fire department when it organized as a paid department in 1900.

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"Back in those old days, there were two cisterns down on the main street and rain water was run into these cisterns from gutters to be used to fight fires. One of the companies had one of those old time hand pumps and it took two men to use that pump to pump the water out of the cistern into another hose that would reach the fire. There was one or two companies of Negro volunteer firemen then also and they really did some good work. I stayed on the fire department about three years after it was re-organized and then I gave it up and went on a fishing trip.

"I also worked at the waterworks plant here for years. Yes, I have been on the police force. That was when we walked. There was about nineteen men on the force and two horses was all we had to ride and they were used by the captain and chief. I remember when they bought the first automobile. We were all supposed to learn how to run it, and do you know I haven't learned until this day how to run an automobile and don't guess I ever will. I could

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run it, start it alright, but when it came time to turn around or back I was out of luck, but then there was several of the boys that never learned how to run an automobile.

“But I just couldn't stay there long. I just had to get out it is just not in me to work where I can't go when I want to and I just can't stay off the river long at a time, even if I am not making much at it. But I have all this ground here and in season I raise vegetables to sell. We have two cows, and I raise my own meat. We have chickens. In fact it is almost like being out in the country and that is what I like, for I had rather have contentment and peace than riches any time.

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“Every summer we go on a camp for weeks at a time, just fishing and how we do enjoy it. Oh, yes we usually get a crowd. Then we always have company over the week end. They come out on Saturday night after they get off from work, and if we were not too far out they stayed over until Monday morning. When we are camping too far away, they have to leave on Sunday night.

“We always prepare for a large crowd on Saturday night. That is when our fish baskets are nice for we can keep fish in them in the river for days at a time and then when we are at the camps we have plenty of vegetables, chickens, eggs, butter and milk for it is no trouble to get all these things from the farmers that come to the camps for they make money by it for all the camps that I have ever been around get tired of fish and want other things to eat.”

His son came back in the room at this time and said, “You are going to have to spend the night.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it is raining so hard you will not be able to get off this hill tonight.

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"What time is it?" I asked and was surprised to find it past five o'clock. I began to think of how I was to get away. I said, "Well, I can get a taxi." They laughed and said, "Do you want to bet on it?"

"But I don't see why I can't," I replied.

Mr. Richards said, "Well, they don't like to come up this hill for it is really bad, but still it is nothing to what it used to be.

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I soon found that they were right, for I tried one hour and didn't get a taxi and it was a long way to the bus line, but I decided to try to get to the bus and any way I didn't much like the idea of riding down that hill. When I was ready to leave I thanked them for their hospitality and that I had enjoyed the afternoon.

Mr. Richards and his son laughed and said, "We are very glad that you came for we have certainly enjoyed having you and how about going fishing with us this summer? We will learn you how to fish, and all the different kind of baits and especially promise to show you what a ground puppy is."

As I started down the steps they all came to the porch with me, their son said: "Wait just a few minutes. I think I see a car that belongs to one of my friends out at the store and I will see if it is I will ask him to take you to town."

"I don't like to be any trouble," I said.

"He won't mind," he said and went on out to the store. He was back in a few minutes and said, "He will be glad to take you in to town, for that is where he is going and said he was ready to go whenever you was.

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I said I was ready at any time, and as the man came out of the store I said, "GoodObye and as I was getting in the car they reminded me of the fishing trip this summer. I thanked them but I don't think I would like a fishing trip with them for they would only have another grand time trying to learn teach me how to fish. The End